

HOODWINKS



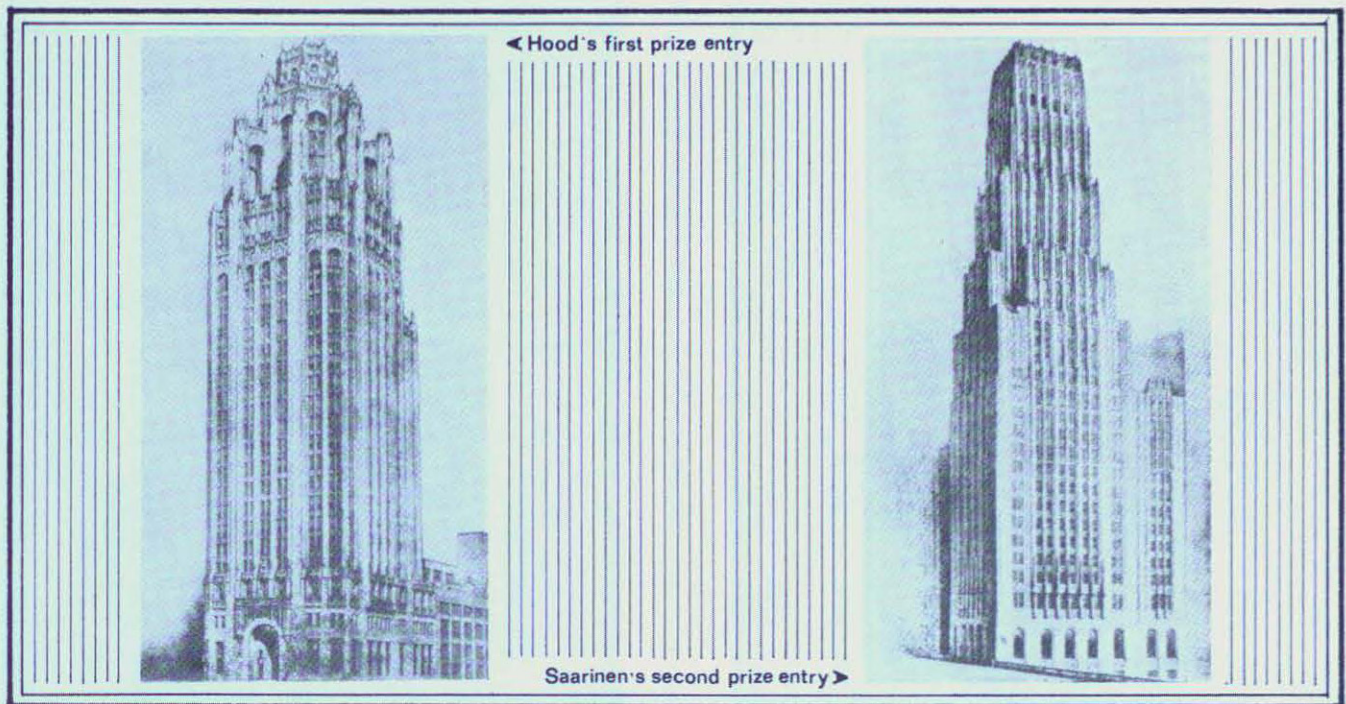
The Architecture of Raymond M. Hood

by Orest J. Humennyj.

Men of great stature reshaped the world in the twentieth century. Guided by a clarity of vision and purpose, swept along by breakthroughs in communication and technology, architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe profoundly altered the visual and habitable nature of our society. Through bold and determined strides these men of destiny carved their names into architectural history.

Notwithstanding the present re-evaluation of the Modern Movement, though valid and painfully overdue, the accomplishments and ideals of its masters will never be forgotten. Centuries from now Wright, as Borromini, will be remembered - architectural demigods. Their minds dauntlessly challenged established thought and stood at the vanguard of original and progressive ideas. Those less gifted, influenced by the Masters, copied, collated and coalesced. They jumped onto the bandwagon of trendiness; they did not 'see'; they did not evolve. Who then will remember Philip Johnson? Who remembers Raymond Hood?

"Masters of ideas are masters of



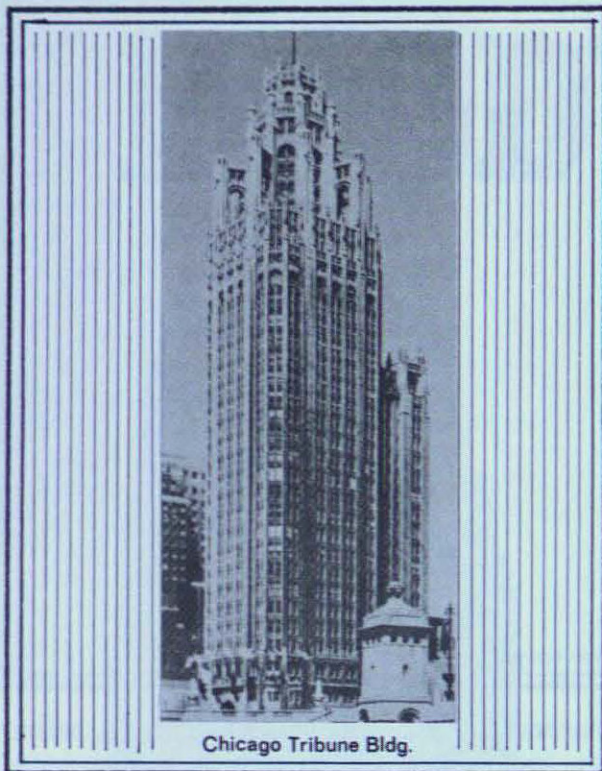
courage; the free will of adventure is in them. They stride where others creep. The pride of action is in them. They explore, they test, they seek realities to meet them face to face - knowing well that realities and illusions exist commingled within and without, but also knowing well that Ego is its own. Hence they walk erect and fearless in the open, with that certitude which vision brings - while slaves are slaves by choice. They seek shelter in the shadows of ideas".¹

Louis H. Sullivan

Though hardly a slave by choice, Raymond Hood, to whom Louis Sullivan was referring, was an originator without any original ideas. New York City's 'brilliant bad boy' from the mid-1920's to the mid-1930's, Hood was nonetheless incredibly gifted. His success reflected the persuasive power of his personality. Affable and engaging, Hood could argue with such sincerity as to test the convictions of the most hardened skeptics - yet without hesitation, with a craftiness that a politician would envy, he would readily abandon or alter his point of view. This ability to simultaneously

harbour two opposing views in his mind, an indication of a first-rate intelligence, was strengthened by his determination and resolve to become the "greatest architect in New York". Only the absence of the 'big break' separated Raymond Hood from his quest.

Opportunity knocked in 1922. John Mead Howells, one of ten architects invited to enter the Chicago Tribune's competition to "erect the most beautiful and distinctive office building in the world",² offered Raymond Hood the chance to submit. In an age when architectural revolution was sweeping Europe and the International Style was becoming manifest, Hood designed a controversial Gothic tower. Evolved from the bondage of the dying Woolworth ideal, Hood's entry nonetheless won the \$50,000 first prize. Incensed by the jury's choice, numerous architects of the day felt that Eliel Saarinen's second place scheme possessed such uncompromising qualities of beauty, soaring disposition and expressive understanding of the American skyscraper that it deserved top honours. Sullivan wrote: "...in that showing was brought into clearest light the deadline that lies between a Master of Ideas and one governed by ideas. There they came,

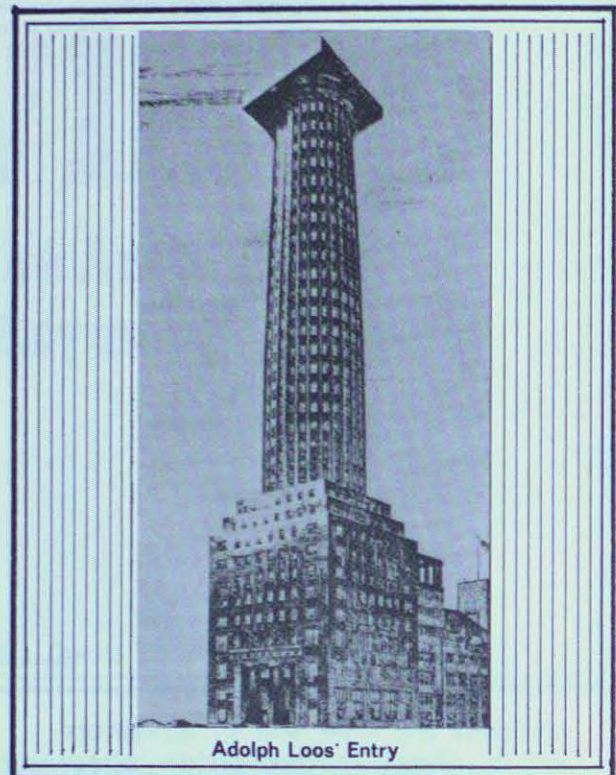


Chicago Tribune Bldg.

squarely face to face: the second prize and the first"³

The publicity generated by the Chicago Tribune Competition in an era of architectural unease was nothing short of phenomenal. Raymond Hood welcomed the resulting attention and controversy. Reminiscent of today's 'media architects' who orient themselves primarily towards publication, he understood and exploited the press. Through it, he eventually established his reputation as an architect in conflict, one who could not run with the pack.

The Competition's immediate impact on Hood, however, was as a resource pool of ideas. With an expedient lack of integrity he drew from it, both in spirit and in detail, during the course of his career. The tower massing of the American Radiator Building in New York is a synthesis of two unmistakable sources: Hood's own Tribune Tower and Saarinen's second place entry. A companion building, for the National Radiator Company in London, transcends the mere inspiration of the base part of Adolph Loos' entry - it is a virtual copy.

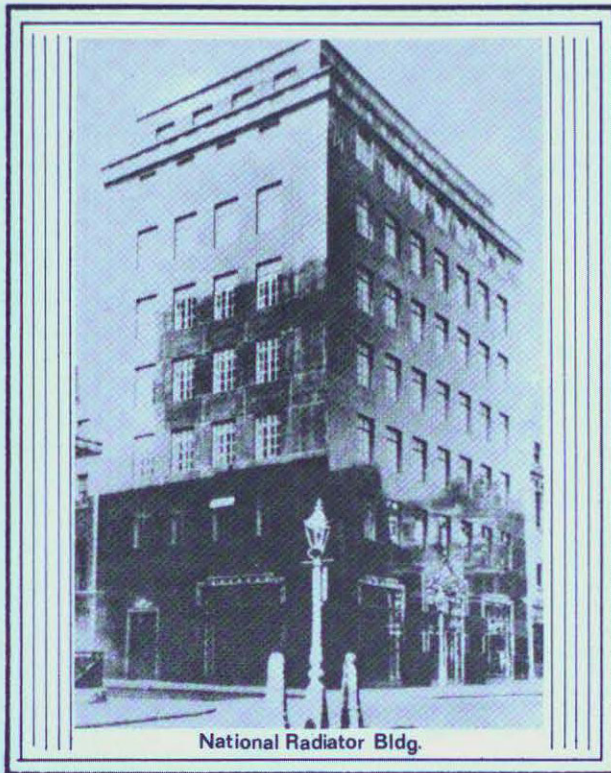


Adolph Loos' Entry

The origins of the McGraw-Hill Building in New York, with its horizontal emphasis and polychromatic differentiation, can be found in an entry by Knut Lonberg Holm.

Yet despite his reputation as a facile stylist and the recurring superficiality of his vocabulary, Raymond Hood was a damned good architect. Disregarding the inherent publicity value, he produced far better buildings than even his clients expected. The intense sweeping emotion that characterized Hood's work failed to be tempered by a stringently pragmatic approach. He was consumed by a conscientious desire to design the most practical and efficient building possible. Practicality was indeed Hood's fundamental architectural philosophy. The final scheme selected was always the one to net the highest return on the investment. In 1929 he wrote: "...beauty is utility, developed in a manner to which the eye is accustomed by habit, insofar as this development does not detract from its quality of usefulness"⁴

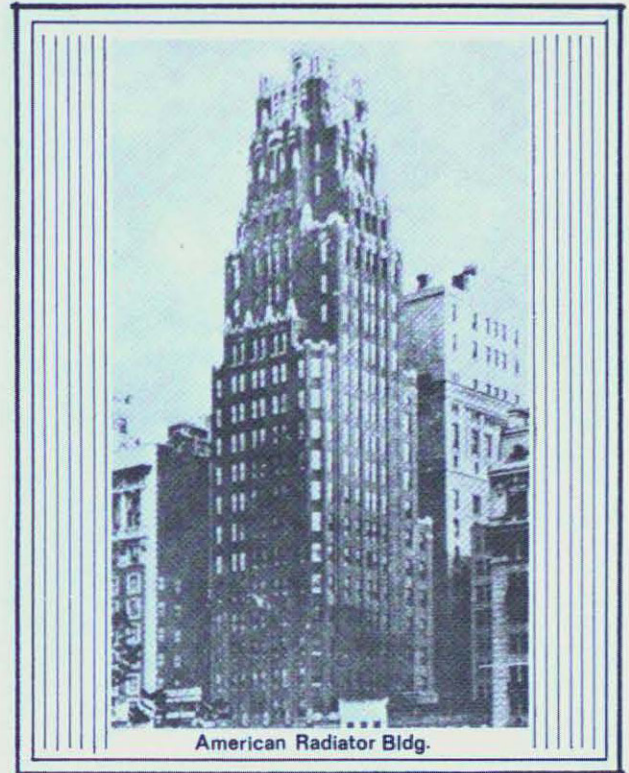
One of Raymond Hood's greatest attributes, and perhaps a hallmark of genius, was his ability to see the obvious.



National Radiator Bldg.

In a society where progress was equated with increased complexity, the development of clear simple solutions required admirable self-confidence. In New York, building out to the allowable limit of the zoning envelope often implied a blind wall; Hood's suggestion for the American Radiator Building was startling - by stepping back the tower he would perforate the blind wall with windows, increasing the quality of office space and thus generated revenue, while reducing the building's overall cost. Faced with the task of designing a crowning pinnacle for the Daily News Building, in order to conceal the jumble of mechanical equipment on the roof, Hood instead carried up the external walls an additional three stories. Also, realizing that offices overlooking a park were more highly prized than those with a view over the chaos of New York's roovescape, he planted ornate gardens on the roofs of Rockefeller Center, a sober commercial establishment. Such design innovations contributed to the legacy of Hood's success, for they constitute standard practice, even today.

The bigness and speed of America, with

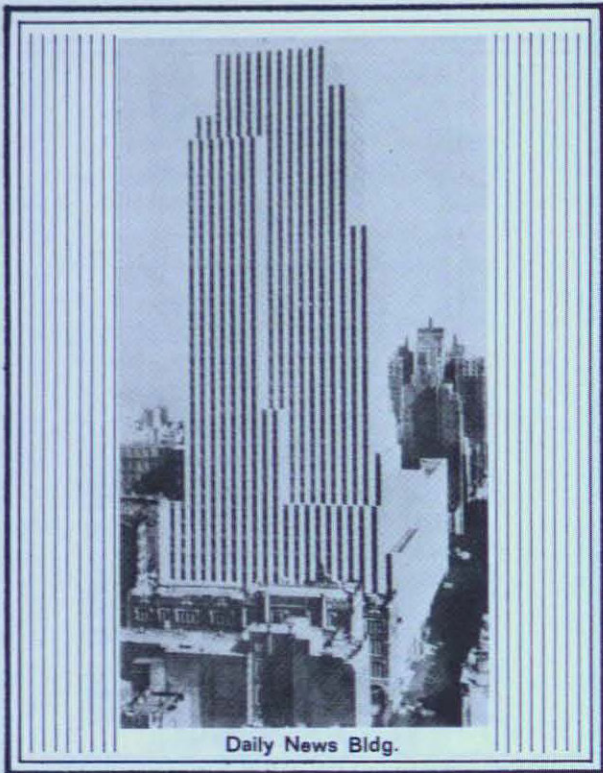


American Radiator Bldg.

commercialism as the guiding spirit of the age, exerted its influence on Raymond Hood as well. It gave his work a particular character, for he shared all its values and ambitions. He believed that the commercial success of urban life depended upon concentration. Hood saw congestion as a good thing, "its the best thing we have in New York. The glory of the skyscraper is that we have provided for it so well".⁵

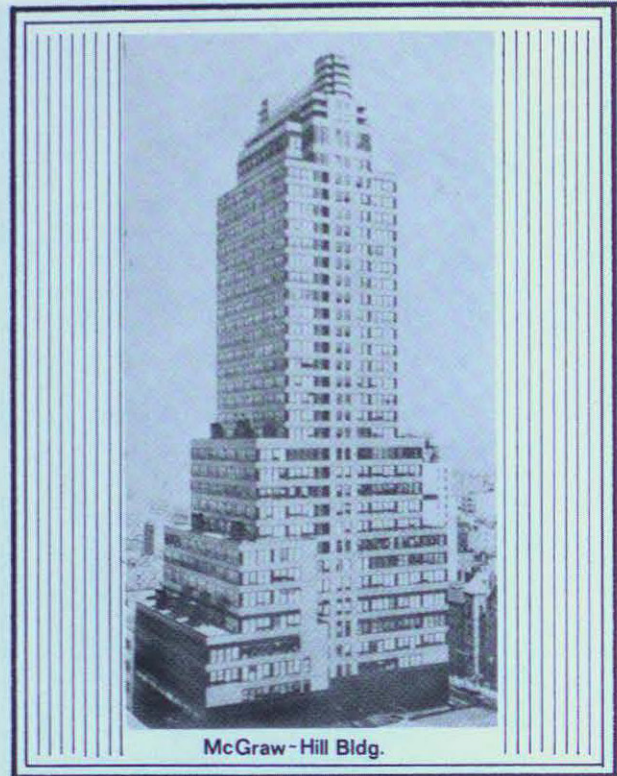
Hood's first skyscraper in New York, the American Radiator Building of 1924, was an overt response to commercial ascendancy. As a direct and formidable symbol, he conceived a self-advertising building. The integrity of the tower's silhouette was maintained through the use of black brick, which prevented undue contrast between the windows and the walls. A glittering gold crown, which terminated the black mass, was constantly animated by either sunshine or floodlights. The resulting synthesis yielded a remarkable torch-like effect; sufficient recognition for a company which manufactured furnaces and heaters.

As the gospel of European Modernism



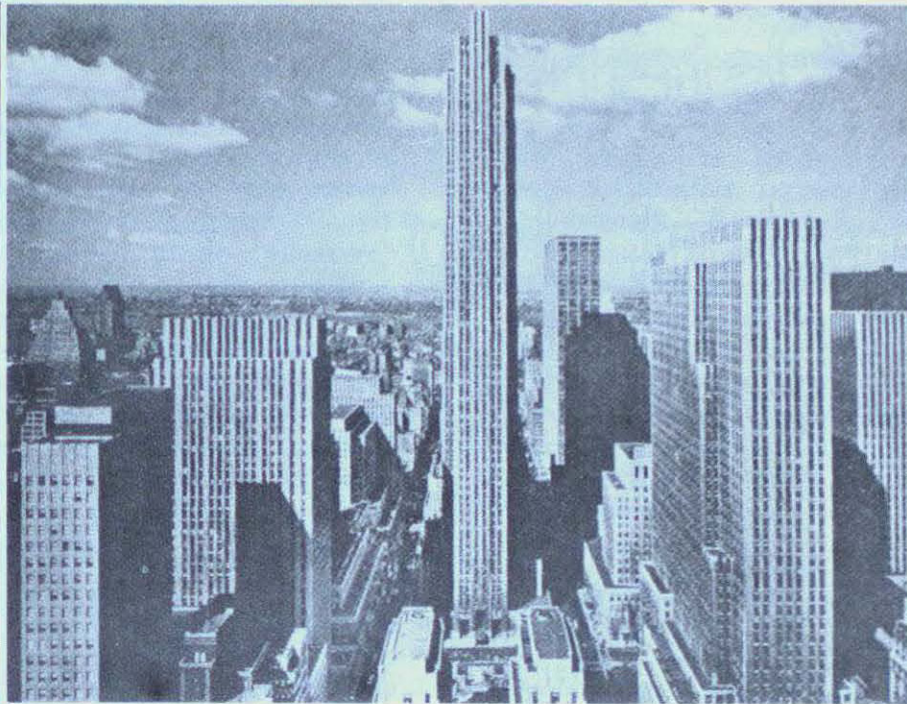
spread to America, Raymond Hood abandoned the Gothic idiom. Exuberant profiles surrendered to powerful clean-cut massing. He argued that worrying about detail on a modern office building was akin to "wondering what sort of lace shawl you should hang on an elephant"⁶. The clay model, fashioned from the crude form of the zoning envelope, emerged as his principal design tool.

The Daily News Building of 1929, Hood's second New York skyscraper, "marked with more distinction than its outside rivals the end of traditional design in this field"⁷. Function and light defined the prevailing order. Conceived in clay and characterized by a strong clean-cut envelope, the emergence of the slab is apparent. Its external articulation, the finest accomplished example of vertical emphasis, accounted for the Daily News Building's celebrity. The upward thrust of the uninterrupted vertical piers of white vitreous brick, offset by dark recessed spandrels, was an afterthought, however, on the part of Raymond Hood - the refinement of a massing model. Fortunately for Hood, the ensuing fuss was sufficiently zealous to establish him



as the period's leading innovator in skyscraper design.

Hood's subsequent departure, the McGraw-Hill Building of 1931, coolly recognized the new European developments in a final 'dose of hedonism'. In direct contrast to the Daily News Building, he contrived the first skyscraper to emphasize the horizontal line. Spandrels formed continuous ribbons and columns, endeavouring to avoid any vertical accent, were recessed, resulting in an honest utilitarian expression of superposed factory floors. Windows, extending from desk height to ceiling and from column to column, reinforced the horizontal stress while inundating the interior space with sunlight. Although the New Yorker called it "a stunt and not a successful one"⁸, the real controversy sprang from Raymond Hood's fondness of whimsy and taste. He relied essentially on a questionable colour as a medium of external expression, covering the McGraw-Hill Building with blue-green glazed terra-cotta tiles. Hood's intent was to effect a tonal progression up the building, from dark to light, allowing it to blend off into the



Rockefeller Center

sky. Its reflective gold coloured window shades complemented the cool blue-green facades, intimating the bizarre image of a "fire raging inside an iceberg"⁹

Frank Lloyd Wright was not impressed. He referred to Raymond Hood as an "opportune New York Functioneer ...climber onto the latest bandwagon, regardless, determined to hold or drive"¹⁰

Hood's conclusive venture, before his premature death of rheumatoid arthritis in 1934, was as an associate in the design collaborative responsible for the most prestigious and successful architectural development in America's history - Rockefeller Center. Engaged as a consultant, primarily for his publicity value, he promptly established himself as the committee's most effective member and clearly dominated the design process. The specification of the building envelopes, epitomized by the distinctive RCA slab, undoubtedly bears Hood's imprint.

Caleb Hornbostel, an old friend, while reminiscing with Raymond Hood, reminded him that he once left the provincial

office "to become the greatest architect in New York".

"The greatest architect in New York?", Hood repeated, focusing on the RCA Building, fiery in a sunset. "By God, I am!"¹¹ □

References

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3. Sullivan, p.152
4. Raymond M. Hood, "What is Beauty in Architecture", *Liberty Magazine*, Dec. 7, 1929
5. Arthur Tappan North, ed., "Raymond Hood", 1931, p.32
6. Walter H. Kilham Jr., "Raymond Hood, Architect", 1973, p.88
7. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries", 1977, p.545
8. as quoted by Kilham, p.177
9. Rem Koolhaas, "Delirious New York", 1978, p.142
10. as quoted by Kilham, p.111
11. as quoted by Koolhaas, p.197